



Once upon a Time: Oral Traditions as History in Africa

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Once Upon a Time: Oral Traditions as History in Africa

"Our books are in our heads."
—Mbope Louis (Congo, 1953)

MOST PRECOLONIAL African civilizations were "oral civilizations." Our own European or American contemporary societies are "literate civilizations." Inevitably, the attitudes of two such different societies toward words and speech differ radically. For the Dogon of the Sudan the world was created when speech was created: "in the beginning was the word."¹ The Tio of Brazzaville use the same word to designate "navel" and "personal name" and believe that if one knows the name of a person one has knowledge of the essence of that person and can bewitch him. What is in a name? To these people, everything. All oral cultures distinguish between important words and banale speech. Most commonly, these important words are inherited from forefathers: the oral traditions. The attitude of members of an oral society toward speech is similar to the reverence members of a literate society attach to the written word. If it is hallowed by authority or antiquity, the word will be treasured.

Members of literate societies find it difficult to shed the prejudice of contempt for the spoken word, the counterpart of pride in writing and respect for the written word. Any historian who deals with oral tradition will have to unlearn this prejudice in order to rediscover the full wonder of words: the shades of meaning they convey to those who ponder them and learn them with care so that they may transmit the wisdom they contain as the culture's most precious legacy to the next generation.

Another difference between modern historians and members of

Oral Traditions as History in Africa

the oral societies they study is the ease with which the written word can be multiplied; we literally live in a sea of written messages. The historian is in a hurry and counts on understanding the message of a text by reading additional texts, by the redundancy built into the very repetition of texts. Africans chide us for hurrying, for not lingering over an oral communication to savor its bouquet, to meditate about it, to make it part of one's intellectual personality, rather the way one savors poetry. We must learn to do this if we want to use oral traditions as sources for history; we must learn to slow down.

Because most societies in Africa south of the Sahara were oral, even if they used writing marginally, historians who study them must confront the question of the validity of oral traditions as sources for history. To go by our experience of what sources survived orally in Europe, for example, in the nineteenth century, is to go wrong. For centuries all data felt to be socially important were written down; only trivia remained unrecorded. Thus, in his survey of oral tradition Ernst Bernheim cited only song and tale, saga, legend, anecdote, *geflügelte Wörter*, and proverbs.² Quite a contrast with Africa, where all the principal political, legal, social, and religious texts were transmitted orally. Indeed, for every functional type of written source in Europe one can find an equivalent oral source in Africa. For instance, most African courts had archivists, who learned by rote the royal genealogy—which legitimized the position of the ruler—and the history of the state—which was its unwritten constitution. Typically, when such an oral civilization moves to become literate, the first items recorded are the texts felt to be most important, just as the first printed book in Europe was the Bible. When Sultan Njoya of the Bamum in the Cameroons invented a script, the first materials written down were the royal chronicle and a code of the customary law and the local pharmacopoeia.³

Historians faced with the problem of reconstructing the past of oral societies such as the African ones did not rely solely on a study of oral traditions. They sought help from other sources, primarily archaeology, linguistics, ethnographic data, biological facts, as well as written data from visitors to the society. Despite the fact that oral tradition played the role of written documentation in literate societies, they were not interchangeable. Oral tradition does have a specificity of its own. This specificity includes limitations on its use as a source for history, limitations which often can be overcome by recourse to other data.

I

"We are telling from a tale
That the Babuya have told long ago."
—Rureke⁴

This verse tells us what oral tradition is: *oral testimony transmitted verbally, from one generation to the next one or more*. This excludes accounts by eyewitnesses which are oral data. It excludes rumor which is oral but is not transmitted from one generation to the next, since rumor is gossip and "hot news," soon to be forgotten. But on occasion rumor can be transmitted and thus become a source for tradition. The time factor in the definition is not arbitrary but crucial, for it changes the whole character of the communication. Oral tradition is presented as the respected lore of the past; it has a tradition, whether it purports to tell specifically what happened in the past (historical traditions) or merely to take delight in the performance of oral wisdom, wit, or beauty of the past (literary traditions). Thus religious hymns, proverbs, and animal stories are just as much oral tradition as are lists of kings or royal chronicles.⁵

Written records and oral traditions differ in two essentials: the verbal character and the mode of transmission of the latter. The usual canons of the historical method can and must be applied to oral sources just as to written documents. It would seem sufficient to sketch the effects of the verbal character and the modes of transmission on oral tradition. Yet, it is also necessary to discuss the meaning and social role these traditions exhibit because African oral tradition is flowering in societies and cultures so foreign to our own.

A written document is an artifact; it is a manuscript. There are no problems as to what the testimony is. A verbal account is not so clearly presented, for a witness frequently gives several successive accounts of the same set of events. Are all of these separate testimonies? It is best to consider all the declarations of one person concerning one referent as a single testimony, provided the witness has not acquired any new knowledge in the interval between his first and his last statement.

Furthermore, there is a crucial difference between a testimony and a tradition. A witness can mix data from several traditions in a single testimony, which happens most often with the most learned informants. Tradition can originate in several ways: as an eyewitness account of events or the invention of a literary statement, for example, a tale; as a fabrication of historical events or a literary

work that is a mix of several other literary works; as a rumor. Plagiarism is common. The initial testimony is then transmitted along a chain of witnesses, generation after generation, until it reaches the last witness. The historian must ascertain what in a testimony belongs to a tradition, whether the tradition really goes back to its supposed point of origin in time and space, and what distortions may have occurred between the first testimony and the last. Contrary to expectation, this often can be done with a reasonable amount of precision.

The form of the oral account must be examined first. Two basic principles are involved in determining form: first, an account can be learned by rote or not, and second, the account has either a rigid or a flexible formal structure. If the account is learned by rote, as in a poem, the words themselves belong to the tradition; otherwise they do not. If the formal structure is rigid, as in epics, the structure belongs to the tradition. The combination of the two principles yields four basic forms of accounts.⁶

	wording frozen	wording free
rigid form	poetry	epic
free form	formula	narrative

Narrative, with free form and free wording, presents the most serious problems in investigating last testimony and its relation to tradition. The last narrative—in fact, every stage of the transmission—may represent several traditions. To disentangle this, one begins by determining the actual author of the last testimony. A person can speak for himself, he can speak for a whole collectivity, he can be prompted by questioning, and he can testify during a confrontation. In the first case he is the sole author of his testimony; in the second case he presents the minimum on which the group agrees, but it is likely that traditions may include more than the testimony indicates; in the third case there are two authors, the one who asks the questions and the one who answers them; and in the fourth case the situation of confrontation often leads to a situation of compromise among several authors. If one knows under which circumstances the testimony was recorded, it becomes possible to evaluate the influence of coauthors. Once this is done, the best way to disentangle several traditions behind one narrative is to examine variants of the narrative in other testimonies.

Starting with the last witness, one must work back along the chain of witnesses to come to the original author of a tradition. Oral tradition about the Koran, the *hadith*, is important in Islam. Hence Muslim scholars developed a technique of assessing the value of each of the links in the chain of testimonies (*isnād*) and will not accept any tradition for which data about the chain are not extant and reasonably complete.⁷ This technique can be followed only in cases where information about the links is also transmitted orally, a rare occurrence outside of Islam, or when the tradition is shallow enough for the links to be identified, as with family traditions. In a general way, however, it is possible to investigate in what milieu a tradition was transmitted, in what manner this was done, and whether checks existed to ensure that the transmission was accurate.

A careful examination of the social and geographical milieu of the tradition will tell a great deal. How was the account given and with what frequency? The climate in which traditions are told influences their content. For instance, there may be a performance⁸ in which artistic value is far more important than accuracy of transmission, or traditions may be short or long because the situation demands it. In Burundi, traditions were short because most of them were told at informal gatherings and everyone had to have his say during the evening; in the neighboring society of Rwanda many narratives were spun out because a one-man professional had to entertain his patron for a whole evening. In both cases accuracy of transmission was not the foremost concern of the witnesses. On the other hand, in Rwanda⁹ transmission of esoteric lore was done in seclusion, the verses were learned by rote in a systematic fashion, mnemotechnic controls were used, every production was checked by fellow specialists, and errors in reproduction were punishable. Obviously, in such cases one can surmise that the transmission was essentially correct.

Formal instruction and the use of checks and mnemotechnical devices were practiced in many African societies, most often with official political traditions, genealogies, or other traditions that functioned as "social charters." But these checks were used for poetry and songs as well. In these cases the prestige of the troubadour and the benefits of his position made it worth his while to learn his texts well. In the case of popular songs, correction by others was an important check on production. Some traditions were recounted frequently, others rarely. The royal genealogy among the Bushoong of Kasai (Congo) was recited formally only at installations of kings,

and in West Africa among the Dogon certain rituals and texts that went along with the rites were recited in public only once every sixty years. In the last case the possibility of error through forgetting becomes great, depending upon frequency of instruction. In cases of very frequent recitation, the multiplication of the reproduction itself could make for the introduction of variants faster than otherwise.

Frequently, glosses or commentaries are present as a parallel tradition to explain obscure points in the major one. Archaisms and imagery allusion in poetry, in particular, could not be understood directly; they elicited questions from the audience. As the reciter answered these questions he established a parallel line of commentary. Often a person learned a tradition but did not understand the meaning of its content. In the next generation, the pupil asked the master what such and such meant. He did not want to tell the apprentice that he himself forgot to ask his master, so he made up an explanation and thus started a spurious commentary. Therefore, one must distinguish carefully between the main tradition and commentary. A commentary is most frequent with poetry but it occurs to some extent with practically every type of tradition. In a story about migrations, for example, the whereabouts of the place-names are often elicited by commentary.

Distortions during transmission—either willed or unconscious—can be at least suspected from an examination of the aims of the tradition in relation to the interests of the milieu in which transmission occurs. A chiefdom whose traditions acknowledge that it lost a battle is a rare thing. When such a tradition is acknowledged, it is probably true because it runs counter to the interest of glorification. In the opposite case, one should record a claim for victory with the observation that this type of tradition is natural in an official milieu.

To evaluate the accuracy of the transmission, all variants that still exist about a tradition should be analyzed. When traditions are popular there are many variants, whose range of variation may be broad or narrow. If the range of variation is broad, the transmission was obviously not very careful. The range should be established through testimony gathered from independent witnesses, that is, people who did not know each other at the time of recording. This method can be followed for many popular traditions.

When accounts are inherited by specialists or have an official character, there may be few or no variants. Often, all the witnesses know each other and have discussed the contents of the tradition,

or, as frequently happens in this case, there is only one or perhaps two or three witnesses. We have a paradox: official traditions, which are obviously most tampered with for social reasons, are best preserved, but there are few variants to check on the state of preservation; popular traditions, though not so much tampered with for official reasons, are often transmitted in a slipshod fashion and can be altered profoundly for aesthetic reasons, as is evident from the multiple variants. Between these two extremes lie a number of intermediate cases.

It is not always possible to reconstruct the original tradition from variants. When the wording is frozen, textual analysis can lead to the construction of an archetype. If the tradition has a rigid form but the wording is free, as in the case of an epic, only part of an archetype can be reconstructed because the wording does not belong completely to the tradition. In the case of a narrative, there is no archetype at all.¹⁰ A comparison of variants in those cases is invaluable, however, because it casts light on the origins of the narrative. If it stems from only one tradition, its plot, episodes, sequence of episodes, setting, and cast should correspond, and in the absence of an archetype a major outline of the original story can be given. But often such narratives, especially literary traditions, originate wholly in borrowings from other texts. When such narratives or parts of narratives pretend to tell what happened in the past but are shown to be derived from fictional stories, the value of the testimony is negligible. There are five major traditions dealing with the origin of the last dynasty to rule over Burundi. By showing how parts and wholes were related to fictional narrative, it was possible to eliminate four of the five traditions and to show for the fifth which parts were fictive. One could show that some fiction traditions already existed when this dynasty was founded around 1700 and thus also indirectly date literary traditions.¹¹

Whether the chain of a tradition really goes back to the time of the supposed occurrence of the events in it can generally be assessed only by determining whether the milieu in which the account was transmitted existed at that time. This method applies to most cases and eliminates automatically stories of creation and chaos. When a tradition is shown to be derived from other traditions, as in the case of Burundi just mentioned, it follows that it does not go back to the purported eyewitness and first author. In other cases it can be shown that the tradition goes back to rumor rather than to eyewitness accounts. This will often be the case when the tradition is

popular, widespread, and appears in areas away from the historical places where events were supposed to have happened. In a Rundi case of the early twentieth century, "the death of Maconco," some variants occur only near the places where the action happened. They form a tradition stemming from eyewitnesses. In other areas, other versions form traditions stemming from rumor current at the time of Maconco's demise. They are untrustworthy about the events themselves but are sources about public sentiment in these parts of the kingdom. Therefore, even traditions which go back to rumor can be of interest to the historian.¹²

Other cases in which it can be shown that traditions were invented are aetiological narratives derived from folk etymology and iconatrophism. The latter case is frequent in Africa. Present populations find artifacts of people who lived in their location once. They automatically attribute them to certain populations who, according to oral tradition, lived there before them. This is logical but often incorrect since many populations may have succeeded one another in a given area and all remnants are not necessarily from the last one that is remembered. Other cases of iconatrophism, rarer in Africa, derive a story from speculation about the builders of a still visible monument. When archaeological finds are correlated with tradition, one must be wary not to take the local assertions as Gospel. It is important to know what the traditions were *before* the discovery was made, and *only* in cases where the site was invisible and unsuspected by the local inhabitants. The spurious commentaries already mentioned are another class of invented traditions.

The effects of the verbal character of the tradition and its transmission on its contents can be gauged. It is clear, however, that the collection of traditions must provide the materials for the evaluation. The collector must perform the difficult task of providing information on his witnesses, the chain and the milieu of the transmission, the existence of mnemotechnic devices, and the frequency of recitation. Above all it is important to find *all* the variants of a given tradition, just as one strives to unearth all the manuscript copies of a written text if the original is lost. These requirements, and those necessary to assess the reliability of a given tradition by applying the canons of the historical method, presuppose a thorough knowledge of the languages involved and a great intimacy with the society and culture in which the traditions flourish.

Undoubtedly, African historians who study their own societies hold an incalculable advantage over outsiders. One can foresee that

collecting and analyzing oral traditions will be more and more one of the special concerns of African historians. Even they need a real familiarity with linguistic, literary, and anthropological techniques and concepts. E. J. Alagoa associated himself with a linguist to transcribe and translate the traditions he recorded in his own language. These difficulties help explain why so few text editions of bodies of traditions have been published. Those that have were usually the result of collaboration between a linguist and an anthropologist, rather than a historian.¹³ For the present far too few text editions exist and most collections made before the 1960's, and many since then, remain of limited value because variants were not considered.¹⁴

Having dealt with the specific elements which distinguish oral traditions from written data it remains to sketch briefly the variety of traditions that can be encountered. The following table sets up a typology for historians. Its criteria are those facts that affect the content of a tradition as well as its form: verbal character, formal structure, manner of transmission, purpose, and significance. This is not a literary or sociological typology; it is rather a listing of kinds of sources in terms of historical interest.

As most of the types listed are familiar, I will restrict comment to the unusual ones. Personal poetry is often elegiac or deals with death. Lyrical, intensely personal poetry is rare in the extreme; both love and the beauties of nature are rarely sung. Liturgical and ceremonial poetry correspond to rubrics in written books on the mass or other services. These rules for procedure along with the formulae to be recited are put in verse and learned by rote by the specialists who have to perform the rites. The Rwanda example¹⁶ is the only detailed case known so far.

Epics in the European sense—that is, with free wording but bound by formal rules—are uncommon at best. Most African epics are narrative, interwoven with song and poetry, and do not fall into this type. In structure they are like narrative but are longer and exhibit an *Epische Breite* that other tales lack. They belong to the artistic tales. All narratives except personal memories, usually transmitted within a family, are myths for the anthropologists, although a category myth would encompass properly only the aetiological narrative. Since the word “myth” is so protean in meaning, it is avoided as a type, but I use it in its anthropological sense.

Auxiliary commentary is prompted by the need to explain another text; its transmission is intimately linked with the main text it

Oral Traditions as History in Africa

A Historical Typology of Oral Traditions¹⁵

Category	Subcategory	Type
Formulae		Names Titles Slogans Didactic formulae (e.g., proverb) Ritual formulae
Poetry (including song)	official	Historical Panegyric Liturgical and ceremonial
	private	Religious Personal
Epics		Epics
Lists		Place-names Personal names (e.g., genealogy)
Narrative	mythical ^a	historical
		General Local Familial Aetiological Artistic Personal memory
Commentaries	legal	Precedents
	auxiliary	Explanations and glosses
	sporadic	Occasional note

^a All narrative except personal narrative is considered "myth" by anthropologists.

explains. Sporadic commentary is not elicited by another tradition and consists of more or less haphazard questions. Its transmission is quite erratic. For example, a boy and his grandfather walk along the field and the boy *may* ask "Where do beans come from?" and the old man *may* know and say "From X or Y." Such traditions are often all the more valuable because they seem so unimportant to those who tell them. They often include data which should have been forgotten by "structural amnesia," as the anthropologists call the process of letting a tradition that has no more practical use fall into oblivion. But they were saved thanks to natural curiosity. Much of the information on the origins of crops, the practices of

trade, changes in style of dress, and so on derives from this humble source.

Most historians have collected only historical narratives to the neglect of many other types, especially commentaries and literary data such as poetry. Yet, these can and do contribute to our knowledge of the past. For concrete examples one can turn to Alagoa's discussion of these in the framework of Nembe (Nigeria) history.¹⁷

Having described the specific characteristics of traditions and sketched their scope and variety, let us turn to their African character and the linguistic and anthropological problems posed when we try to apply the historical method to them.

II

La pensée sauvage (the untutored mind; the wild pansy).

—Lévi-Strauss (1962)

The translator of *La pensée sauvage* called it *The Savage Mind* and missed the meaning. I call attention to this example, not only to emphasize the problem of multiple meaning, but also to draw attention to a major work of an author who stresses the unconscious symbolic meaning of narrative in "oral societies." *La pensée sauvage* is a motto for the historian who probes into the meaning and background of traditions in order to assess their value as documents.

Traditions should be recorded in the language in which they were transmitted. This is usually done for most kinds of oral transmission, with the exception of narratives, commentaries, and epics. Indeed, it has been suggested that historians rely on instantaneous translations for immediate understanding of narratives,¹⁸ but those who have recorded "live" traditions in the original would not agree with this suggestion. In a translation the linguistic "markers," the exact shadings or nuances, the multiple meanings of the original narration, the whole literary climate of the performance is lost. With that loss, the impact of the language on the content of the tradition will remain largely undetected.

A linguistic and literary analysis is essential to understanding the meaning of traditions. First, the formal structure of the text must be established. If the form is rigid, its rules must be found. This sort of analysis has, as yet, not been pursued to any great extent, not even by linguists. The pioneering work for different genres of poetry is that of T. Kamanzi and A. Coupez.¹⁹ For the different varieties

of Rwanda poetry they established the formal norms; the linguistic markers, such as uncommon uses of linguistic features of the type referred to as "poetic license"; and the patterns of expected evolution in content. But all literary genres recognized by the people themselves have different formal characteristics. Therefore, the historian must determine how each group classifies its own literature and must study samples of every genre to define the formal structure of each.

Each verbal expression also contains an internal structure. Any utterance has such a structure, but it is most visible in narratives. This internal structure includes a plot, a sequence of episodes, the building-in of one or more climaxes, parallelisms, repetitions, and transformations of episodic material. All these points must be analyzed before the narrative can be used, for the requirements of the internal structure may well have distorted the content. When, for example, the Rundi rebel is killed just in the sight of the messengers who are running to the spot bringing pardon, one sees immediately that some rearrangement of the actual events may have been involved. This type of internal structure has been called the morphology of the text.²⁰ It gives access to an understanding of the dynamics of growth of the text, especially if variants are available. For instance, H. Scheub showed that the Xhosa *intsomi* narratives are built around kernels of proverbs or songs. Episodes built around these kernels are then strung together to make up a tale. Obviously, the dynamic evolution of such a genre allows for reordering combinations of kernels, dropping some, adding others. These are artistic tales, yet their techniques have influenced historical narratives as well. Indeed, famous sayings are the proverbs around which pseudo-historical episodes are often constructed.²¹ Beyond the internal structure and an analysis of its dynamics there is yet another level of structure, the symbolic structural level. The techniques for discovering it have been refined by Lévi-Strauss.²² Its impact on the contents of tradition can readily be seen by anyone who analyzes the symbolic meaning of the "images d'Epinal," or popular imagery, in history.

The internal structure of an account is the key to understanding its different meanings. There are three levels of meaning: the literal, the intended, and the symbolic, the latter being largely unconscious. To understand the literal meaning special attention is paid to items such as archaisms, esoteric language, foreign expressions, and key cultural terms, just as is done for written texts. Understanding key

words is complicated by the fact that they are part of a foreign culture. In addition, the semantic fields of the terms may have changed in time, and they are, in any case, so broad that the context dictates the meaning. Extensive scholarly dictionaries are not available for most African languages, and a simple gloss may only cause confusion. In Burundi the word *ganwa* refers to the royal lineage, the aristocracy. But it can also designate anyone who is in a position of authority, aristocrat or not. The context may tell which meaning must be chosen. Some key terms such as "witchcraft," "conquest," "brother," and so forth require a profound understanding of the society and the culture involved. These words are often false friends, for a first reading of the account may not seem to pose any problem of interpretation at all. Such terms are comparable to the word *justitia* in medieval Latin documents or "democracy" in more recent times.

The intended meaning of an account corresponds to its internal structure. Literary devices, including playing with words, are usually responsible for the difference between literal and intended meaning. These devices are those proper to each literary genre—allegory, poetic allusion, explicit symbol—all found in written documents as well. The fondness for stereotypes in oral societies is great, whether these are simple stock sentences or complex episodes used as *topoi* (clichés) or even complete *Wandersagen*.²³ To understand why a complex cliché or a *Wandersage* is used is not always easy. First the cliché must be recognized, which can be done only in reference to a corpus of data including those of many other societies besides the one studied. Unfortunately for the Africanist, no reliable reference work on this subject exists. The folk-motiv index is of little use,²⁴ and the work by H. Baumann, completed in 1936, deals with only a fraction of such clichés.²⁵

Clichés do mask some facts handed down by tradition. For example, J. S. Boston found two stereotypes current among the Igala to explain why a community was founded. In one the founder was a hunter; in the other the founder was a member of the royal house. The hunter cliché meant, Boston suggests, that the founder came from outside the established framework of authority. He did not necessarily migrate from another society; he may have merely assumed leadership without previous legitimation.²⁶

If working with clichés and *Wandersagen* involves again a real familiarity with the literature and the society of the people who tell the tradition, an understanding of the unconscious symbolic

meaning of a text is even more of a challenge. In the parlance of Lévi-Strauss and the anthropologists who followed him, most narratives are myths. Any myth refers to a dualistic structure of basic symbols which express, not only the fundamental values cherished by that particular society, or indeed any human society, but also the working of the human mind itself. The human mind must organize, before it can grasp and communicate, raw data, and its basic principle of organization is a binary system of parallels and oppositions involving transformation of propositions by shift of terms or inversion. There is no doubt that such a level of meaning really exists. To explain what it is or may be does not, however, necessarily invalidate the whole content of a tradition, as T. O. Beidelman would like to have it.²⁷ Serious distortion of the events in the account can be expected, but the events may have happened. Because the popular accounts of the Mayflower are highly complex symbolic statements does not mean that there never was a Mayflower. In addition, the discovery of the unconscious message concealed in all texts leads only to a probability that is often less than the probabilities historians are wont to consider valid. There are two approaches, both involving a great deal of personal interpretation of symbols by the anthropologist. One is the method used by V. Turner, who links symbols to each other—verbal symbols to symbols in ritual and symbols in one society to those operating elsewhere.²⁸ The other approach is exemplified by Lévi-Strauss in his massive work on myths. The structure of one myth becomes clearer by the analysis of other myths, whether they belong to the same culture or to historically related cultures. His studies deal with South America and in order to explain his reference myth, a tale of the Bororo, he must range over the whole mythology of both Americas.²⁹

How can the historian take this into consideration when he tries to establish the validity of an account? In theory, the unconscious message can be the most insidious factor of distortion during the transmission, realigning the original statement of the eyewitness to make it conform more and more to a given system of symbols. An effective approach is to start from the internal structure, list all symbols that may appear, and see how these fit into a system by analyzing the ritual and ceremony of the culture involved. Again the historian must be an anthropologist.

He must also have a sense for literary analysis. We have considered most of the questions dealt with in literary analysis, with the exception of the crucial one: What alternatives are open to

performers to make an account more beautiful or to make it dull? What is banale, what is original, what has strong appeal, what bores? Among a set of variants, which one is a work of art and which is a pedestrian rendering? Only members steeped in the culture itself, and sometimes only the more sensitive among them, can give an answer to this. This is yet another reason why it is preferable that study of traditions be entrusted to people who belong to the society itself. But outsiders can ask the audiences who have listened to the performances which of several variants are preferred and why, thus recording the prevailing tastes. This is what the historian must know, for it is the force that distorts the original message most. Moreover, many oral literary data are remembered only for their aesthetic appeal. Their beauty may have distorted the message, but at the same time it has been responsible for the very preservation of the poem or song.

Once the meaning of traditions is understood, one must determine why they have been transmitted. What are their functions and purposes? Have these purposes distorted an original or led to the fabrication of a spurious tradition? Just as for written sources, one first determines if a tradition is official or private, if the testimony is voluntary or unconscious. Most oral literary data give unconscious information since they do not purport to tell what happened in the past. Official traditions range the gamut of politics and social interests: royal genealogies and dynastic histories providing legitimation for a regime and a line of rulers; local traditions "proving" rights over land; family traditions showing aristocratic precedence or prestige. A tradition can be official with respect to one group and private when it deals with another group. A family tradition may be the official account of its ancestors but it is a private account when it deals with the history of the state because the family is only a tiny part of the state and does not have authority to speak officially on state history.

Every tradition has some use, even if it is merely fulfilling an aesthetic or didactic function. Since one tradition may serve several purposes, or its role may have changed during the transmission because the society changed, the assessment of distortions induced by social pressures is sometimes difficult to estimate. A common situation is one where genealogies are manipulated and altered to explain why social groups *now* exhibit the relationships they have to other social groups *now*. They are an explanation of society, especially when society is based entirely on principles linked with

Oral Traditions as History in Africa

descent. Unimportant ancestors are forgotten and the genealogy is "telescoped." The reverse happens as well. This sort of situation has led some anthropologists such as J. Goody to argue that there is a homeostatic relationship between a society and its oral inheritance. What is conflicting with changed norms or new institutions is altered or dropped and at any given time the corpus of traditions in an oral society corresponds entirely to its composition, its structures, and its functions. Inconvenient traditions are simply forgotten by a process of "structural amnesia": "In oral societies the cultural tradition is transmitted almost entirely by face-to-face communication; and changes in its content are accompanied by the homeostatic process of forgetting or transforming those parts of the tradition that cease to be either necessary or relevant."³⁰

Professor Goody exaggerates. If this process were so complete, why would one encounter archaisms, obscure passages, and above all traditions which exhibit a conflict of interests born from changes in the society?³¹ Moreover, the more popular and less specialized a tradition is, the less affected it will be by changes in social structure.³² One does well to remember that most traditions deal with relatively shallow time depths. The changes in African societies during the nineteenth century can be documented and their impact on official and other traditions assessed.

A tradition also embodies values and ideals, as it is the product of a given set of basic categories in the Kantian sense. Each society expresses its beliefs, values, and ideals in its literature and stereotypes. From the corpus of traditions it is easy to deduce which ideals, which virtues, and which vices are exemplified by different heroes in the narratives (and allow for estimation of distortion). Formulae and poetry, more than any other kinds of tradition, yield this type of information.

Categories, inculcated during the childhood years, prior to experience by the senses, include the basic notions about space, time, cause, historical truth, color, and so on—a constellation of basic notions that form the framework for all cognition. These must be known to the student of tradition, for their effect on the perception, the interpretation, and the transmission of events is paramount. If people hold that causal chains cannot exist but that each present-day phenomenon derives directly from an original cause, they negate the concept of change as a set of antecedents leading to a set of consequences and this attitude colors all their traditions. Or again, if they believe in recurring cyclical time from a golden age

through a period of quietness to further military glory and then collapse back to the golden age, their historical traditions will be arranged so as to fit the pattern, at least in the most obvious places. All of this is true for written data as well.

After reading the recital of all the factors that may influence or distort the original account, one may well wonder if oral tradition can be used at all. Yet it does work. First, it is not uncommon for a tradition to be corroborated by other independent traditions or by data from other disciplines or written records. Such a coincidence establishes a high degree of probability for the historical reality of such information. Then it must be remembered that *all* history is a matter of evaluation and of probabilities. Even if the probabilities remain lower than one could wish for, the data can be used to recreate the past as long as their strengths and weaknesses are made clear and as long as they are the best evidence available. In any case, the cardinal rule for all sources remains true: they must be used in conjunction with all other available evidence. It remains to be seen what other sources can be used, how oral tradition compares to them, and whether traditions have been, in fact, valuable for reconstructing African history.

III

A comparison between oral tradition and other sources available to the historian of Africa indicates best what uses can and should be made of tradition. The other data are written documents, archaeological artifacts, cultural material, and linguistic information.³³ All these data, with the exception of written texts, are studied by specialists other than the historian. Interpretation, therefore, requires at least some familiarity with the other disciplines involved—an understanding of the reasoning used by other scholars and the validity of their deductions.

Written documents in Africa were done by outsiders who misunderstood the workings of the society and the culture they were dealing with. The older the document, the more this is true. But the dictum applies even to the majority of writings which originated during the colonial period. Proponents of oral traditions emphasize that they give an inside view that corrects the perspective of the writings. There is a great measure of truth to this allegation. But written documents are precious because of their precise chronology, because they are often less distorted than traditions, and because

most writings are originals.³⁴ Before the colonial period written sources yield information about trade, accounts of major political developments, and vague descriptions of items dealing with social structure, religion, or art. Oral traditions, on the other hand, cover virtually every aspect of society and culture barring two blind spots: quantitative data and unconscious gradual change, especially in religion, value systems, and ideology. But oral tradition can be used for all sociopolitical information, economics, religion, art, and such fields as demography, population movements, and material culture.

Both traditions and written data in Africa have increased in quantity, from a handful starting around the fifteenth century to a plethora of documents by 1900. For many places, especially after 1750 or 1800, oral traditions and written documents can be used jointly. Large parts of Africa remain undocumented in the written record before 1850 and later, although in the lower Congo and Angola a fair quantity of writings survives from the sixteenth century onward. Thus in the tropical forest or in the interior of Tanzania oral tradition is the major source until almost 1880, while the history of the former kingdom of Kongo has been reconstructed almost entirely from written records.

Relations between oral traditions and writing can be intimate. Professor William A. Brown found an occasional nineteenth-century letter surviving in Masina (Mali). Its contents were explained by reference to a whole set of correspondence now lost but remembered only because of the surviving letter. The letter served as a mnemotechnic device to give a reason and some help for retaining the tradition. More recently one finds that information learned from books is fed back into the tradition. The more traditions have been collected and published, the more the danger of such a process exists. It is often easy to detect if the collector is aware of the problem, and is really no different from the problem of phony traditions picked up from radio or television.

Archaeology is the other major source for reconstructing the past of the dark continent. For periods before A.D. 1400 it stands almost alone. It remains crucial for the recovery of data until well into the eighteenth century, and if archaeologists were sensitive to the needs of historians, they would even investigate many nineteenth-century sites as well. Archaeology yields a reasonably good chronology until the end of the seventeenth century,³⁵ its data have no cultural bias, it testifies directly from the artifacts. From these much can be deduced about economics, nutrition, environment, pattern

of settlement, rank (grave goods), a scale of political organization, and art. This is much less than what some have recently claimed.³⁶ The relationship between archaeology and oral tradition is also intimate. Often the collection of tradition helps to locate sites and sites throw light on the validity of traditions, whether they confirm or invalidate. In a recent case, a grave that should have been dated around A.D. 1650 according to tradition turned out to be circa A.D. 400. The Rwanda dynasty, from which the tradition stemmed, had probably annexed the hallowed grave sites of much earlier ages for its own, no doubt to legitimize its own position. Even if a tradition is shown to be wholly untrustworthy, as has happened, the new problem becomes to know why, when, and by whom the tradition was fabricated, itself a fact of history.

The danger of iconatrophly or backfeeding from a site to tradition and then back has been mentioned. Before the dig begins, traditions about a site should be collected and careful record should be made of anything visible on the site before the excavation. Given this precaution, it is obvious that the confrontation of sites and traditions is most fruitful. The notorious chronological weakness of the traditions can be strengthened by the archaeologist, who can also check if the general picture provided for a given period by the traditions is likely or not. The traditions, on the other hand, fill in the picture of the culture uncovered by the spade with regard to intangible items.

Traditions also exist for certain objects, such as the famous fifteenth-century Dogon (Tellem) statuettes. The objects can be dated sometimes by the tradition and sometimes by the art style, as with the royal portraits of the Kuba. These objects were never buried and thus never became artifacts for the archaeologist. They are—in strict historical parlance—monuments, and occupy a position halfway between archaeological and ethnographic data. Ethnographic data is divided into tangible artifacts and intangible “behavior.” Distributions through space provide clues to diffusion of the objects or practices. But this technique has run into serious problems and the quality of the evidence is often marginal. It is therefore best to combine it with linguistic research into the presence of loan words. Ethnographic evidence can also be used in other ways, for instance to reconstruct the evolution of a set of societies *known* to be related from a common ancestral society.³⁷ Oral tradition has not yet been used often in conjunction with this type of data.

Oral Traditions as History in Africa

Linguistics, also, has not been used extensively in relation to traditions, beyond its contribution in translating the language in which the traditions are told. Historical linguistics that deals with a very remote past has no possible overlap with oral tradition, but loan words, whose potential historical significance is just being grasped, make it possible to compare evidence thus adduced with the record of the tradition. A Kuba tradition says that the royal family came from the Mongo area. Certainty is provided when it is found that the word *boolo* (strong) in the royal salutation is unknown elsewhere in Kuba speech, but is a typical Mongo word. Linguistics, like ethnographic data, is extremely weak in chronology, its most serious drawback. Only when loan words can be dated in relative sequence, or when evidence about internal evolution within a language can be given in sequence, will this handicap disappear.

Other disciplines occasionally contribute some historical evidence to oral tradition. Biology, for example, contributes knowledge of the origins of domesticated plants and animals, even if it cannot as yet tell us much about the development of different strains of animals, plants, and human populations. On some occasions oral traditions are considered in connection with this type of evidence.³⁸

Obviously, then, oral tradition is one of the three main sources of African history. It suffers from a major weakness, however: an uncertain chronology, the backbone of history. African historians have had to come to terms with this problem in various ways. It is well known that each society has its own concept of time, a time related to biological or structural phenomena: a day, a month, a year, a generation, an age-class, a length of reign. Most oral literary data do not even contain an internal sequence of relative time and would be undatable and unusable were it not for information from outside the account. Often, dating can be accomplished by a study of distribution, comparison with historical accounts that borrowed from literary materials, and so on. But the dating remains rough. In fact, no one so far has even attempted a chronology for these materials in any part or for the whole of Africa.

Many narrative sources have a relative chronology—"A followed B"—and the problem is to convert the local narrative sequence into a universal chronology. In fact, the problem is not only one of time but also one of space. A tradition refers to a "universe" that may be quite small: a few settlements, a lineage, a small chiefdom. To make it meaningful it must be put into a set of traditions related

to the neighboring elements in space. This solves the problem of limitation in space, but not in time.³⁹

Dating by reference to a sun eclipse or other meteorological occurrence is possible when these have been observed.⁴⁰ Astronomers can date the time of day and date of every eclipse of the sun that has occurred or will occur. Since more than one past eclipse has generally occurred in the area where a tradition is remembered, a rough calculation of the time elapsed since the eclipse of the tradition happened, working in terms of generations or lengths of reign or age-grades backwards, is necessary to find which one of the possible eclipses is the correct one. If the time of day is mentioned by tradition, the possibility of error in identifying the correct eclipse becomes minimal. The use of other meteorological phenomena is rarer, but the occurrence of some meteors or other celestial phenomena have helped to date specific events on occasion. It was highly likely that a Kuba (Congo) king, Mbakam, ruled in 1680 when there was a sun eclipse. Confirmation comes from the fact that tradition remembered it had once snowed during his reign, an occurrence almost miraculous 4° south of the equator. *Spectrum of Time*, a service of the British astronomical association, was able to tell us that the only cold wave in southern Africa strong enough to produce snow occurred between 1690 and 1693, thus confirming the choice of the eclipse date over an alternative choice of 1619.

Almost equally strong chronology can be obtained by direct correlation between a tradition and written data or an archaeological date. But most of the time one must work with very rough indicators of structural time age-sets, genealogies, and lengths of reign. For age-sets, nineteenth-century practice learned what fixed intervals of time elapsed between two initiations so that a chronology can be constructed from that. These intervals are quite regular, generally every eight, ten, or fifteen years.

The situation is quite different for lengths of reign or a generation span, as a measure of the time elapsed between the birth of a man and that of his oldest child. It has been shown⁴¹ that the variability of averages of generations and lengths of reign from one culture to another is quite significant. The formula often used in Africa—twenty-seven to thirty years to the generation—is completely unsound. There are only two ways in which one can convert these relative time measurements on an absolute scale. The first way consists of calculating the averages in each case for portions of the

Oral Traditions as History in Africa

time span which can be determined by other means and then extrapolating the average for the portions backward to the beginning of the time scale in the tradition. Dated portions of lists exist for most of nineteenth-century Africa. It is obvious that the method is still rough because it presupposes that general sociopolitical conditions remained unchanged over the whole period and that the average length of reign or generation was not affected by such conditions. Knowledge of an average age or reign does not allow one to determine easily when a particular generation or a particular king lived. The second approach, using an extremely large sample of known dynasties and genealogies pertaining to aristocracies in the literate world, will eventually make it possible to state probabilities for both length of generation and length of reign given certain conditions of descent system, marriage, succession, and environment. It will thus be possible to detect improbabilities in traditions.

David Henige, who is now conducting such a study, discovered that it is extremely rare for a father-son succession to continue undisturbed beyond the sixth or seventh generation. One will be able to assess the effect of the founder (long or short reign) on average reign length and other similar data. Once these tables of probabilities become available, it will be possible to state that in case A ten generations represent x years with a probability of 70 per cent or more, the most accurate way this kind of information can be assessed.

Another method for converting relative into absolute chronology is through the use of synchronisms. This technique, first developed to cope with ancient Mesopotamian chronology, is now applied in Africa to the fairly small number of cases where adjacent kingdoms allowed for its use. From the Middle Eastern experience it is known that synchronisms between reigns through more than one intermediary often become spurious and should be rejected. One can, however, rely on synchronism between three units. If it is known that A ruled when B ruled and B ruled when C ruled, then one can accept that A ruled when C ruled. In practice, traditions are scrutinized first to determine whether the synchronisms come early or late in the reigns of the rulers mentioned and the putative synchronisms may be adapted by taking this into account.

By using these techniques to convert relative into absolute dating, most oral traditions can be assigned a valid chronology. Once the results of research in progress become available, the degree

of validity should become much greater than the one standard deviation of the radiocarbon chronology used in archaeology.

Oral traditions have been used intensively and are being used more and more in reconstructing Africa's history. This trend is evident in the *Journal of African History*. Since its inception in 1960, the journal has had at least one article a year involving oral tradition. Three recent general histories of East Africa rely mainly on oral tradition for the period between 1500 and 1850, especially for the interior. A remarkable feature of programs to collect oral tradition in Tanzania has been the systematic search for family traditions and even eyewitness accounts of events from the early colonial period—the dramatic *maji maji* rising of 1905-1907, for example.⁴² In Central and West Africa oral tradition is also used intensively. Even in the literate areas of the Sudan, such research is so valued that the Niger Republic set up a special center for the collection and preservation of oral tradition.⁴³ It is therefore no longer a question of whether oral traditions should be used. They are. It is not a question of whether they can be valid. How valid are they? This depends on the careful collection and analysis of the data. We must regret, along with many anthropologists and archaeologists, that much shoddy work is still being done. There is room for considerable improvement in our practices, especially in collecting. But one must not condemn the documentation because it is not well handled by some. Even as things stand, imperfect as they are, no one can imagine any longer a history of Africa reconstructed without any recourse to oral traditions. They have proved too valuable. That is why it is worth tackling the intricate problems involved in gathering and evaluating traditions. Much of what they have to say no other voice can tell.

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Oral Traditions as History in Africa

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Oral Traditions as History in Africa

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